

Second Reaction: *Roller Girl* and the Ups, Downs, Aches, and Pains of Teen Relationships

Jamieson, Victoria. *Roller Girl*. Dial, 2015.

Clare Withers



This engaging graphic novel for middle schoolers garnered a slew of awards, including a Newbery Honor, and it's easy to understand why. The combination of text and images makes for a rich and moving reading experience. Fast-paced, funny, and at times uncomfortable, readers share the turbulent experience of once inseparable friends growing apart and struggling to figure out who they are.

Roller Girl offers an illuminating glimpse of adolescent angst without the clichés that often accompany materials marketed to teens. Jamieson delivers a rarity—an entry point for conversations about some things that are difficult to talk about: teen friendship and identity. I gave the book to my own daughter, and as we discussed point of view, plot, subplots, and images, I realized how the richness of the format and the authenticity of the story fostered discussion.

When BFFs Astrid and Nicole attend a Rose City Rollers match, everything changes for the 12-year-olds. Protagonist Astrid is obsessed with star player Rainbow's amazing performance. Astrid assumes her friend is just as excited as she is to sign up for summer junior roller derby camp, but Nicole opts for a ballet camp, so Astrid goes it alone. The development of new physical skills—including skating, falling safely, and other derby strategy—is accompanied by learning to navigate new territory socially. She experiences highs and lows, defeats and

loneliness, and she perseveres, often sustained by modest triumphs. The graphic novel format delivers a rollercoaster (or should I say roller derby) range of emotions. We see her hurt, angry, and frustrated; we see her solving a problem (such as not having a ride home) or enjoying the camaraderie of her teammates. Spunky, vulnerable Astrid takes a lot of knocks and rises, sometimes shakily, to the challenges of change without support from traditional places like her mom and her closest confidant.

My daughter and I compared Astrid's point of view via a graphic novel format with first person narratives and diary formats. While the latter two allow us as readers to get close to the main character, that's not necessarily the whole story. The coupling of dialog and thought bubbles with images allows for a lot more information. In the beginning, for example, we see that Astrid isn't really listening to Nicole. Later, when Astrid is upset about not getting the position she wanted, we see Zoey's complicated reactions to being named as jammer. Even mean-girl Rachel's actions look a little less awful to the reader when viewed through a wider lens. The snarky, still not appropriate, is not as bad as Astrid feels it. Jamieson doesn't shy away from rock bottom. In a particularly wrenching scene, when her mother says, "I feel like I don't know who you are anymore," an emotional Astrid blurts out "Well . . . maybe I don't know who I am either!" (unpaged).

Getting back to avoiding clichés, there are lots of surprises. Astrid isn't the best at the end. Despite all her hard work and determination, she didn't get the jammer position she coveted. And though the focus is on Astrid, who's opting for an aggressive competitive sport, ballet-lover Nicole is in the background with her own new world—including the physical demands of dancing on pointe and pushy, boy-crazy Rachel. There's no neatly tied ending. The girls didn't remain estranged, but they didn't revert back to best friends either. And neither had someone now truly filling the vacant BFF slot. As my daughter said, it was left on a "real note, like it would actually happen."

It's so appropriate, as my young reader pointed out, that in the big scene near the end Astrid comes full circle. Just like Rainbow's inspiring play at the derby match at the beginning of the novel, Astrid throws herself into skating 100% and takes one for the team. It's been a long journey for Astrid, both physically and emotionally, to get from thinking only about herself to taking the needs of friends and teammates into account. As Rainbow writes in a note to Astrid, "It takes a real hero to take a hit for the team, and to let the spotlight shine on someone else" (unpaged).

About the Author

Clare Withers is Children's Literature and Psychology Liaison Librarian at the University of Pittsburgh. She works closely with researchers and children's lit enthusiasts, often making use of primary sources from the Elizabeth Nesbitt Children's Literature Special Collection. A children's librarian for over a decade, she still performs puppet shows and tells stories for young audiences.